

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 BANGKO 10833 01 OF 02 150254Z
ACTION EA-12

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3019
INFO AMCONSUL HONG KONG
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY PARIS
USLO PEKING
AMEMBASSY TOKYO
AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE
CINCPAC HONOLULU
DIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BANGKOK 10833

CINCPAC ALSO FOR POLAD

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TAGS: MPOS, PBOR, CB, VM
SUBJ: WESTERN JOURNALISTS UNCONVINced BY VIETNAMESE BORDER WAR
SHOW

REF: (A) TOKYO 2621 (B) BANGKOK 6745

SUMMARY: WESTERN JOURNALISTS WHO WERE SUDDENLY INVITED TO VIET-
NAM IN EARLY MARCH (REF B) WERE UNCONVINced BY THE SHOW WHICH
HANOI STAGED. THEY CONCLUDED THAT THERE HAD BEEN MUCH LESS ACTIV-
ITY FROM CAMBODIA THAN HANOI HAS CLAIMED. THEY ALSO WERE PER-
PLEXED BY THE VERY FEW PAVN TROOPS IN BORDER AREAS. REFUGEES
ARRIVING IN THE PAST TWO WEEKS FROM CHAU DOC AND HA TIEN TEND
TO CORROBORATE THE JOURNALISTS' FINDINGS. END SUMMARY.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 BANGKO 10833 01 OF 02 150254Z

1. ECHOING IMPRESSIONS OF THE WESTERN DIPLOMATS WHO WERE TAKEN
TO VIEW "CAMBODIAN AGGRESSION" (REF A), THE GROUP OF WESTERN
JOURNALISTS WHO VISITED VIET-NAM IN MID-MARCH WERE TREATED TO AN
UNCONVINCING, STAGED SHOW. ONE OF THE JOURNALISTS, A RELIABLE
OBSERVER, CONFIDED TO US THAT EVEN THE MEMBER OF THE PARTY LESS
CRITICAL OF HANOI FOUND THE SHOW UNBELIEVEABLE. THEY VISITED TAY
NINH, CHAU DOC, AND HA TIEN, AREAS WHERE THE PRIMARY FIGHTING

SUPPOSEDLY HAS BEEN GOING ON SINCE APRIL, 1977.

2. THERE WAS NO SIGN OF ANY FIGHTING IN CHAU DOC, THE FORMER PROVINCE CAPITAL. THEY WERE TOLD, AS WE WERE BY A REFUGEE LAST WEEK WHO JUST ARRIVED FROM CHAU DOC, THAT THE TOWN WAS NEVER SERIOUSLY ATTACKED AND REPORTEDLY NEVER EVACUATED. IN A FIELD NEAR CHAU DOC, THE REPORTERS WERE ADVISED BY THEIR VIETNAMESE GUIDES THAT THERE WERE SIX BATTALIONS OF CAMBODIANS HIDING IN THE RICE FIELDS NEARBY. THE AREA SEEMED TO BE GUARDED BY ONLY A HANDFUL OF REGIONAL VIETNAMESE FORCES. MORTAR AND ARTILLERY ROUNDS WERE MAINLY OUTGOING. THE VILLAGES IN THE AREA WERE EVACUATED BUT NOT BURNED. THE REPORTERS WERE TOLD THAT THE CAMBODIANS HAD STOLEN A BUFFALO HERE OR FIRED A MORTAR ROUND THERE. AT ONE POINT, THE REPORTERS WERE TOLD THAT AN INCOMING ROUND WOULD BE FORTHCOMING SHORTLY. AS SOON AS THEY MOVED TO THE PROTECTION OF A DITCH, A ROUND INDEED CAME IN. SHORTLY THEREAFTER THEY HEARD AN "ALL CLEAR, YOU CAN DEPART", CALLED OUT FROM A VN MILITARY RADIO OPERATOR. THE ONLY REAL DESTRUCTION THEY SAW IN THE AREA WAS THE VILLAGE OF TINH VIEN, ONE KILOMETER FROM THE BORDER, WHICH WAS DESTROYED. A "NON-PROGRAMMED WOMAN" APPEARED AND TOLD THEM THAT THE TOWN HAD BEEN DESTROYED IN AN ATTACK ON APRIL 30, 1977. SHE AWOKE TO CRIES OF "KILL, KILL, KILL, ALL THE VILLAGERS MUST BE KILLED. THIS IS CAMBODIAN TERRITORY." SUBSEQUENTLY, SHE ESCAPED BUT SAW BODIES OF VILLAGERS DISEMBOWELED.

3. IN TAY NINH THERE WAS ALSO LITTLE SIGN OF FIGHTING. THE REPORT-
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 BANGKO 10833 01 OF 02 150254Z

ERS WERE SHOWN SIX HOUSES WHICH WERE BURNED AND TOLD THAT THEY HAD BEEN HIT BY "130MM GUNS". THE REPORTERS WENT WEST OF TAY NINH CITY TO WITHIN TEN KILOMETERS OF THE BORDER. THERE WAS NO SIGN OF EXTENSIVE GUERRILLA ACTIVITY OR HEAVY FIGHTING. NO TANK TRACKS AND LITTLE SIGN OF PAVN. THEY SAW A LIMITED NUMBER OF REGIONAL FORCE SOLDIERS. THEY ALSO SAW ABOUT TWENTY TRUCKS CARRYING SOLDIERS TOWARD THE BORDER.

4. IMPATIENT WITH THE SHOW, THE REPORTERS TOLD THEIR GUIDES THAT THEY "WANTED TO SEE THE WAR". "WE WANT TO SEE THE CADAVERS". THEY WERE TAKEN TO HA TIEN MARCH 17. THE TOWN WAS MOSTLY DESERTED. THERE WERE SOME SIGNS THAT FIGHTING HAD OCCURRED, POSSIBLY MUCH EARLIER. THERE WAS NO SIGN THAT THE TOWN HAD BEEN OCCUPIED BY THE CAMBODIANS. THEY WERE TOLD BY THEIR GUIDES THAT THERE HAD BEEN THREE DAYS OF FIGHTING DURING THE ATTACK BY CAMBODIANS MARCH 13-16 (WHICH RADIO HANOI PUBLICIZED LOUDLY) JUST PRIOR TO THE VISITORS' VISIT TO HA TIEN. THE REPORTERS WERE THEN TAKEN TO A HAMLET SEVEN KILOMETERS NORTHWEST OF HA TIEN TOWN. THEY WERE TOLD THAT THERE HAD BEEN TWO REGIMENTS OF CAMBODIANS IN A BATTLE WHICH OCCURRED TWO HOURS EARLIER. AT THE FOOT OF THE HILLS IN TWO LOCATIONS THE REPORTERS SAW THE BODIES OF 25-30 PERSONS, WHO AT FIRST THEY THOUGHT WERE KHMER ROUGE.

THEY WERE NOT, BUT WERE VILLAGERS. THE SIGHT WAS HORRIFYING, ONE JOURNALIST TOLD US. THERE WERE MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN. THE BODIES WERE DISEMBOWELLED, CASTRATED, A BAMBOO POLE STILL PIERCED ONE BODY. THE REST LOOKED STAGED: A WOMAN WEEPING WITH A CRYING CHILD IN HER LAP. AN AK-47 LAID OUT WITH CHINESE MARKINGS, A KHMER ROUGE BILLFOLD (WITHOUT MONEY IN CAMBODIA ONE WONDERS WHY A SOLDIER WOULD CARRY A BILLFOLD). THEY WERE TOLD THAT TWO REGIMENTS OF CAMBODIANS ATTACKED TWO PAVN COMPANIES (120 MEN). ONE SOLDIER TOLD THEM, "WE WILL DIE TO THE LAST MAN IF NECESSARY." THE REPORTERS REGARDED THE SCENE AS STAGED. BUT THEN THEY SPOTTED AN SRV ID CARD WITH THE ETHNIC BLANK FILLED WITH "KHMER". SHORTLY THEREAFTER THEY FOUND A WOMAN WHO DID NOT APPEAR TO BE PART OF THE SHOW. SHE CONFIRMED THAT THE PEOPLE LIVING IN THE HAMLET, INCLUDING HERSELF, WERE ALL LONG-TIME KHMER

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 BANGKO 10833 01 OF 02 150254Z

RESIDENTS OF VIET-NAM (KHMER KROM). THE CADAVERS WERE HER FRIENDS AND RELATIVES.

CONFIDENTIAL

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CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 BANGKO 10833 02 OF 02 150257Z
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CONFIDENTIAL SECTION 2 OF 2 BANGKOK 10833

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5. FROM THEIR EXPERIENCES, THE JOURNALIST CONCLUDED THAT (A) THE GUERRILLA ACTIVITY FROM CAMBODIA HAS BEEN FAR LESS THAN HANOI HAS TRIED TO LEAD THE WORLD TO BELIEVE; (B) THE MARCH 13-16 ATTACK ON HA TIEN WAS MUCH LESS SIGNIFICANT THAT HANOI CLAIMED; (C) WITH THE EXCEPTION OF A FEW PAVN IN HA TIEN AND TAY NINH THE FRONTIER IS BEING GUARDED BY LOCAL REGIONAL FORCES. THE JOURNALISTS ALSO SUSPECTED THAT THE MYSTERIOUS ABSENCE OF PAVN FROM SIGHT MUST MEAN THAT PAVN WAS ACROSS THE FRONTIER IN CAMBODIA. THE JOURNALISTS THOUGHT THIS WOULD HELP EXPLAIN WHY THERE IS SO LITTLE EVIDENCE OF FIGHTING ON THE VIETNAMESE SIDE AND WHY THEIR GUIDES COULD INFORM THEM OF THE IMMINENCE OF AN INCOMING ROUND. THE JOURNALISTS CONCLUDED THAT HANOI WAS PROBABLY BUILDING A CASE FOR WHATEVER MILITARY ACTION THE VIETNAMESE MIGHT DECIDE ULTIMATELY TO UNDERTAKE AGAINST CAMBODIA.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 BANGKO 10833 02 OF 02 150257Z

6. WE DISCUSSED WITH REFUGEES WHO ARRIVED LAST WEEK FROM HA TIEN THE COURSE OF THE FIGHTING IN HA TIEN. APPARENTLY, THE CAMBODIANS ATTACKED IN APRIL 1977, PENETRATING THE OUTER PERIMETER OF HA TIEN'S DEFENSE PERIMETER. FIGHTING LASTED ALL NIGHT. AT DAWN, PAVN REINFORCEMENTS DROVE THE CAMBODIANS FROM THE CITY BACK TOWARD CAMBODIA. HA TIEN WAS EVACUATED, LEAVING BEHIND ONE MEMBER OF EACH HOUSEHOLD TO PROTECT THE HOUSES AND FURNISHINGS. ROUGHLY THIRTY PERCENT OF THE PEOPLE EVENTUALLY RETURNED. IN DECEMBER, 1977, PAVN TROOPS CROSSED THE BORDER AND PUSHED INTO CAMBODIA TEN TO FIFTEEN KILOMETERS, SUBSEQUENTLY WITHDRAWING. DURING MARCH 13-16 THE CAMBODIANS ATTACKED AGAIN BUT DID NOT ENTER THE TOWN OF HA TIEN, ACCORDING TO REFUGEES. HANOI'S CLAIMS ABOUT THE SIZE OF THE CAMBODIAN ATTACKS APPEARED INFLATED. SUBSEQUENTLY, UNTIL THE REFUGEES LEFT HA TIEN ABOUT MARCH 27, SPORADIC ATTACKS RECURRED, BUT WITHOUT SERIOUSLY THREATENING THE TOWN OF HA TIEN, ACCORDING TO THE REFUGEES. VIETNAMESE CASUALTIES HAVE CONSISTENTLY BEEN HIGH.

7. CASES OF AWOL HAVE ALSO BEEN VERY HIGH, ACCORDING TO THE REFUGEES. COMMON REMARK OF AWOL SOLDIERS, ACCORDING TO TWO KHMER KROM REFUGEES, WAS THAT THE CAMBODIANS ARE "QUICK, INTREPID, AND DANGEROUS." OTHER REFUGEES SAID THAT BOTH SIDES FOUGHT HARD WITH VERY HIGH CASUALTIES.

8. COMMENT: WE COME TO SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT CONCLUSIONS FROM THOSE OF THE JOURNALISTS QUOTED IN PARA 5 ABOVE. AN NBC TEAM WHICH VISITED VIET-NAM RECENTLY WAS THANKED BY THE VIETNAMESE FOR HAVING HELPED VIET-NAM WIN THE WAR. WE THINK HANOI, LIKE PHNOM PENH, HAS GREATLY INFLATED ITS

REPORTS TO BUILD THEIR RESPECTIVE CASES. PRESUMABLY, HANOI
THOUGHT THAT THEIR DOG AND PONY DISPLAY WOULD LEAD THE
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CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 BANGKO 10833 02 OF 02 150257Z

GRATEFUL JOURNALISTS TO FILE REPORTS FAVORABLE TO THE VIET--
NAMESE POSITION. HANIO SEEMS TO HAVE BADLY MIDJUDGED THEIR
ABILITY TO MANIPULATE THE JOURNALISTS, AS THEY SEEM TO
HAVE DONE WITH THE DIPLOMATS EARLIER.

9. AS FOR THE LOCATION OF THE PAVN TROOPS, WE ARE A LITTLE
SURPRISED THAT SO FEW WERE SEEN. WE ASSUME THAT THEY WERE
LOCATED CLOSER TO BORDER AREAS AT LEAST IN TAY NINH, WHERE
THE VIETNAMESE GUIDES JUDGED IT UNWISE TO TAKE THE JOURNALISTS.
IT WOULD APPEAR THAT REGIONAL FORCES ARE GUARDING THE FRONTIER
IN THE DELTA OUTSIDE HA TIEN.

10. FINALLY, WE ARE STRUCK BY THE SIMILARITY OF THE CAMBODIAN
ATTACKS ON THE VIET BORDER WITH THOSE ON THE
THAI BORDER, AT LEAST TACTICALLY. ATTACKS DESCRIBED CONSIST
OF RAIDS ON BORDER TOWNS, FREQUENTLY POPULATED BY ETHNIC
KHMERS, ATROCITIES AND RETREAT, SEEMINGLY WITH THE PURPOSE
OF TERRORISING SETTLEMENTS CLOSE TO THE BORDERS AND LEADING
TO A DECLINE OF GOVERNMENT (VIET OR THAI) PRESENCE AND
STRENGTH IN THE BORDER AREAS. CAMBODIANS WILL THEN PRESUMABLY
FILL THE VACUUM.

WHITEHOUSE

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Message Attributes

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